NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0777 MAY 13, 1976
ANITA CHAPMAN

PROBABLE BREAKTHROUGH IN KOREAN WAR DISEASE

ANNCR:

EARLIER THIS MONTH, DOCTORS WORKING UNDER U.S. ARMY CONTRACT IN SEOUL, KOREA ANNOUNCED DISCOVERY OF THE PROBABLE CAUSE OF A DISEASE KNOWN IN ASIA SINCE EARLY THIS CENTURY. HERE WITH MORE ON THE STORY IS VOA'S ANITA CHAPMAN:

VOICE:

WITH THE OUTBREAK OF THE KOREAN WAR IN 1950, LITTLE-POPULATED AREAS OF THAT COUNTRY BECAME BATTLEGROUNDS FOR THE OPPOSING TROOPS. FORWARD CAMPS WERE CONSTRUCTED, TRENCHES DUG. AND AMONG AMERICAN SOLDIERS A CURIOUS ILLNESS BROKE OUT.

IT CAME TO BE CALLED HEMORRAGIC FEVER. ITS SYMPTOMS WERE SHOCK AND INTERNAL BLEEDING, SOMETIMES ACCOMPANIED BY KIDNEY FAILURE. DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF THE WAR MORE THAN EIGHT HUNDRED AMERICAN TROOPS WERE HOSPITALIZED WITH THE FEVER AND ALMOST TEN PER CENT OF THEM DIED. IT STRUCK WITH THE FORCE OF AN EPIDEMIC AND CAUSED A CERTAIN PANIC SINCE THE CAUSE WAS UNKNOWN AND ONLY THE SYMPTOMS COULD BE TREATED. AS THE WAR CONTINUED, NEWS CAME THAT NORTH KOREAN AND RUSSIAN SOLDIERS WERE ALSO BEING FELLED BY THE DISEASE. WHILE THIS WAS THE FIRST THAT AMERICANS KNEW OF HEMORRAGIC FEVER, IT'S BEEN KNOWN SINCE EARLY THIS CENTURY IN CHINA AND THE SOVIET UNION.

RESEARCH TEAMS WORKING TO FIND THE VIRUS AND THE CARRIE OF THE DISEASE WERE GRIMLY UNSUCCESSFUL YEAR AFTER YEAR, AS THE DISEASE SPREAD QUIETLY FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE LOW-

LANDS OF KOREA, LEAVING ONLY THE OFFSHORE ISLANDS QUITE FREE OF THE FEVER.

AMONG THOSE WORKING ON THE PROBLEM MORE RECENTLY WAS DR. LEE HO WANG, AN AMERICAN-TRAINED MICROBIOLOGIST WHO FOR SEVEN YEARS HAS CARRIED ON RESEARCH AT KOREA UNIVERSITY'S MEDICAL COLLEGE. AN INITIAL BREAKTHROUGH CAME FOUR YEARS AGO, ALMOST ACCIDENTALLY, WHEN A LABORATORY TECHNICIAN ENGAGED IN CATCHING RODENTS FELL ILL WITH THE FEVER. SEARCH FOR THE VIRUS CAUSING THE DISEASE AND FOR ITS CARRIER NARROWED TO THE FOUR SPECIES OF RODENT THE TECHNICIAN HAD BEEN HANDLING WHEN STRICKEN. DR. HO AND HIS COLLEAGES HAVE NOW ISOLATED WHAT THEY BELIEVE TO BE THE HEMORRAGIC FEVER VIRUS AND ITS HOST: A TINY FIELD MOUSE THAT LIVES IN MOUNTAINS AND AVOIDS HUMAN HABITATIONS. THEY SUGGEST THAT SOLDIERS CONTRACTED THE DISEASE BY DIGGING TRENCHES IN INFECTED SOIL AND BY BREATHING VIRUS-LADEN AIR.

ARMY DOCTORS IN WASHINGTON ARE EXPRESSING CAUTIOUS ENTHUSIASM FOR DR. HO'S FINDINGS AND PLAN SOON TO FULLY REVIEW HIS EXPERIMENTS WITH HIM. THEY CALL HIS DATA VERY EXCITING AND CERTAINLY A BREAKTHROUGH, AS NOW POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION CAN BE MADE OF PERSONS AND ANIMALS WHO HAVE OR HAVE HAD THE DISEASE.

BUT ISOLATING THE VIRUS IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP IN CONTROLLING THE DISEASE. NOW WILL COME THE LENTHY PROCESS OF PERFECTING A VACCINE THAT CAN BE USED TO IMMUNIZE PEOPLE AGAINST HEMMORAGIC FEVER. IF ALL GOES WELL, AND INITIAL REPORTS OF DR. HO'S WORK ARE CONFIRMED, THERE MAY BE A USABLE VACCINE IN SOME FIVE OR SIX YEARS.

GH/PY